



Case Study 22

Working with Diverse Stakeholders in Newbirth, South Carolina

The town of Newbirth, South Carolina, was incorporated in 1992 in response to the urban expansion that was making its way northward from metropolitan Charleston, South Carolina into the rural counties. Rural residents in the then unincorporated rural area believed their community would be consumed by the upscale development that had transformed nearby rural areas into a suburban bedroom city of Charleston.

Newbirth is contained within 8.6 square miles (about 5,500 acres) along a major U.S. highway. It lies approximately 5 miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean and the barrier islands off the South Carolina coast. The town consists of three residential and commercial pods. The town is surrounded by the 250,000-acre Francis Marion National Forest. Small parcels of forest land are actually located in the town. Immediately adjacent to Newbirth are a national wildlife refuge, a coastal reserve, and a state park. Newbirth has approximately 1,200 residents, the majority of whom are African American (65 percent); the remaining third are White. The town is rural according to census definitions and place characteristics.

Several years ago, Newbirth residents passed a referendum for municipally supplied water. The town's mostly black town council and mayor pointed to the fact that many of the town's residents (particularly African Americans) lived in substandard housing with unsafe drinking water and sanitation. Town leaders argued that a municipal water system would deliver safe, reliable drinking water to residents.

There were concerns, however, from some residents that public water would encourage subur-

ban and urban-style development. These oppositions came mainly from white residents, some of whom were newcomers to the area. These residents moved to Newbirth because they wanted to live in a rural environment where they would not have to contend with the possibility of nearby development. Those opposing the water system cited examples of other local areas that had been consumed by development when the towns' infrastructures changed to include public water and sewer lines.

System proponents (mostly African American), on the other hand, have said opponents to the system exaggerate the extent of development that a water line might promote. Proponents also concede that a limited amount of development would be good for Newbirth because of the very limited job opportunities in the town and surrounding areas. They observe that Newbirth is in a position to gain economically from the demand for resort-style development in the Charleston area.

Newbirth has two options for a municipal water system. The town can construct its own system or pipe water in from a town approximately five miles to the south. The least expensive option would be to import the water; however, the town would need to obtain a right of way from the U.S. Forest Service to do this. The most direct route from the town south of Newbirth would be directly through 1.5 miles of the forest. Newbirth administrators have petitioned the Forest Service to allow Newbirth to construct a water line on the forest lands. Town leaders maintain that the forest has an obligation to aid small, economically struggling communities in their development. Opponents, again, argue that if the agency allows the water

line to be run through federal property, the agency would contribute indirectly to urban sprawl. Opponents feel strongly that such added infrastructure is but the beginnings of development in Newbirth. When asked about the Forest Service's position on this issue, public affairs officers are directed to explain that there are increasing demands on the Francis Marion stemming from an expanding human population in counties in and neighboring the forest. The Forest Service's goal is to be sensitive to the role the forest plays in addressing the needs of local communities by 1) contributing to the social, economic, and environmental well-being of local communities; 2) contributing to the long-term economic stability of local communities through conservation and use of forest resources; and 3) cooperating in the urban/rural development of the area.

Town residents were not satisfied with this response and have requested that the forest supervisor and district ranger attend a citizen's meeting at the town hall to discuss this issue publicly.

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